



An Arms Dealer Tries to Sell War to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

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Published: April 15, 2012

Permalink: <http://239days.com/2012/04/15/an-arms-dealer-tries-to-sell-war-to-abdul-baha/>

HUDSON MAXIM AWOKE WITH a swollen cheek and bags under his eyes. A toothache had kept him up for most of the night. He should have gone to the dentist, but there was a puzzle to solve so he went to his lab instead. With his right hand he lifted a pair of tongs to place a grey crystal of mercury fulminate in the fire. He held the next piece ready in his bare left hand: in his unpredictable line of work—explosives—Maxim knew better, but this was a sleepy morning and his mouth hurt. The instant the irons in his right hand touched the flame, his left hand exploded, torn off at the wrist in a crack of pain and a flash of light.

That was eighteen years ago. Today, on April 15, 1912, the one-handed Hudson Maxim stood in the fifth-floor reception room of Suite 111 at the Hotel Ansonia, awaiting a word with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He had a bone to pick with the “prophet of peace.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá greeted him in English (“Welcome! Welcome! Very welcome!”), they exchanged pleasantries, then Maxim got down to business.

“I understand you are a messenger of peace to this country,” he began. “What is your opinion of modern war?”

“Everything that prevents war is good,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá replied.

War was the Maxim family business. Hiram, his elder brother, had invented the machine gun in 1883, conquering Africa for the British. At the Battle of Shangani River in Rhodesia, Maxim guns mowed down 1,500 Matabele warriors while just four Englishmen died. The younger Hudson’s claim to fame was smokeless gunpowder. Generals could now blow up the enemy without choking their own men—a major leap forward. “He has made enough high explosives to blow all the navies in the world out of water and start them well on toward the moon,” Allen Benson wrote in the New York Times.

“Do you consider the next great national war necessary?” Maxim asked.

“Why not try peace for awhile?” Abdu’l-Bahá answered. “If we find war is better it will not be difficult to fight again; but if we find that peace is the glorification of humanity, the impulse of true civilization, the stimulus to inventive genius and the means of attainment to the good-pleasure of God, we must agree to adhere to it and establish it permanently.”

Maxim tried a different tack: “Fewer are killed in modern engagements than the battles of ancient times; the range is longer and the action less deadly.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá invited Maxim to consider the world beyond the narrow confines of the battlefield. “The possibilities are incalculable, inconceivable,” he said, “the after effects even more dreadful than the initial shock. . . . The country suffers beyond all power of estimation; agriculture is crippled, abandoned; sustenance fails, poverty and suffering continue long afterward.”

Perhaps ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would respond better to a picture. Maxim took out a pen—with the hand he hadn’t blown off—and started to draw. “The effect of a bomb,” he explained, “is not so great as expected. Most of its force is expended upward into the air. It is impossible to mass men close enough to it for a full utilization of its energy.”

Maxim’s arguments about war that morning at the Ansonia ran the gamut of nineteenth-century myth. War is human nature; conflict is an ingredient of healthy social evolution; economic interests will trump national hostility; the deadlier the weapon the less likely it will be used: deterrence equals peace. “War is no more dangerous now than automobiling,” he said.

It was still only 1912.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá could mount a compelling argument, but he never pressed a point. Instead, he turned the subject toward Maxim himself.

“You are a celebrated inventor and scientific expert whose energies and faculties are employed in the production of means for human destruction Now you have the opportunity of becoming doubly famous. You must practice the science of peace.

. . . You must discover the means of peace; invent guns of love which will shake the foundations of humanity.”

“Then will it be said by the people of the world, this is Mr. Maxim, inventor of the guns of war, discoverer of high explosives, military scientist, who has also discovered and invented means for increasing the life and love of man; who has

put an end to the strife of nations and uprooted the tree of war. . . . Then will your life become pregnant and productive with really great results. . . . God will be pleased with you and from every standpoint of estimation you will be the perfect man.”

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

Jonathan Menon, “An Arms Dealer Tries to Sell War to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, April 15, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/04/15/an-arms-dealer-tries-to-sell-war-to-abdul-baha/>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Menon, Jonathan. “An Arms Dealer Tries to Sell War to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.” *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. April 15, 2012. <http://239days.com/2012/04/15/an-arms-dealer-tries-to-sell-war-to-abdul-baha/>.

HOW TO CITE THE *239 Days in America* WEBSITE IN A BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Menon, Jonathan, and Robert Sockett, eds. *239 Days in America*. <http://239days.com/>.

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